At the time of its “discovery,” the American continent was identified as the Fourth World of our planet. Today the term has been taken up again by its “Indian,” or native, peoples to describe their own world – both its threatened present condition and its political history, which stretches back thousands of years before Columbus. Using indigenous sources as primary sources, Book of the Fourth World explores the landscapes and chronologies of this world as they have been seen and interpreted from the inside. Mapping the continent by this literary means, it pays particular attention to the well-documented traditions of the Nahuatl (Aztec) and Maya to the north of the isthmus, and the Quechua-speaking Inca to the south. According to both the literary evidence and the testimony of Native Americans themselves, notably at the Quito conference of July 1990, an underlying coherence is to be found in the creation story told in the “bible of America,” the Popol vuh of the Quiché Maya. A classic of world literature, this sixteenth-century work sets out a story of evolution understood only hundreds of years later by Europe; its natural philosophy is now being defended, as a way of life critical to that of the planet itself, in the tropical forests of the Amazon.

Taking a skeptical view of the 1992 quincentenary and respecting the testimony of the Indians themselves, this study brings together a wide range of evidence from what is now Latin and Anglo America. In doing so, it offers detailed analyses of texts that range far back into the centuries of civilized life that antedated Columbus.
BOOK OF THE FOURTH WORLD
BOOK OF THE FOURTH WORLD

READING THE NATIVE AMERICAS
THROUGH THEIR LITERATURE

GORDON BROTHERSTON

Indiana University at Bloomington
University of Essex, England
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Prefatory Notes

The beginnings of this book go back to the mid-1960s, when “American Indian literature” gained some currency in English as a term relevant not just to the USA and Canada but to the continent as a whole. As journals like Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock’s *Alcheringa* confirmed, this was the time of pioneer literary translation, “reworking,” as it was called, of American-language texts. Direct involvement with native texts of this kind led in turn to curiosity about their verbal and visual language and continuities they establish over time and the memory they defend. Moreover, they could be seen to have been drawn upon, as palimpsest, by Western authors from Michel Montaigne to Miguel Angel Asturias; conversely, the traditions they represent have incorporated Western texts from the days of the Aztec Aesop. Some results of my inquiries were published in articles in the 1970s and in *Image of the New World: The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts* in 1979.

In bringing together and discussing over a hundred native texts, *Image of the New World* raised more questions than it resolved. Among the key issues that emerged were script and how to define it, modes of embodying and mapping space, calendars as the reckoning of tribute in kind or labor, the pastoralism peculiar to the Andes, and the links between food production and the shape of cosmogony. Over the 1980s, when native America began to loom larger as the “Fourth World,” these largely technical problems fed more and more into awareness of that world’s global significance. Offered here, this “book” of and about it does not claim to do full justice to all or any of these issues. It does, however, at least correlate them, in terms suggested in the first and last instance by the testimony of Native Americans themselves, in a time and space their very texts imply and affirm. It attends to that native coherence ceaselessly splintered by Western politics and philosophy.
Prefatory notes

ON SPELLING AND OTHER CONVENTIONS

Where possible, spellings of native names and terms are those of manuscript sources, though a certain standardization has been made in the interests of consistency; for example, the older form “Tahuantinsuyu” is adhered to throughout, cu- covers qua-, and the Latin i is preferred to the English e (as in tipi, not tepee). Set titles of native works have also been used, and these are listed in the first section of the Bibliography. Dating years B.C. is done according to the astronomers’ count, which includes a year 0, rather than to that of the historians, which does not.

Normally, stress has not been marked on native words, especially when to do so would reflect a European rather than a local pronunciation (for example, Tenochtitlán). For convenience, Mesoamerican “number-names” are with a digit when they identify days or years (for example, 1 Reed) and are written out when they refer to other concepts (for example, the person Eight Deer or the world age Four Wind).

Unless otherwise stated, translations into English are the author’s.
Acknowledgments

A list of acknowledgments of sources quoted and reproduced appears at the end of the Bibliography.

If the present study is seen to succeed in its stated aim, the thanks must go first to Native Americans who have subtly shown a way, in a phrase, story, or academic response, among them Cuthbert Simon, Simon Ortiz, Roger Echo-Hawk, Roberto Cruz, Salvador Palomino, Luis Reyes García, Pedro Bello, and many others whose names I never knew. I have also gained immeasurably from discussion at various forums over the years, among them the Essex MA group, whose meetings in the Museum of Mankind were kindly hosted by Elizabeth Carmichael; the American Indian Workshop of the early 1980s (Christian Feest, Nelcya Delance); Olivia Harris’s Jornadas andinas (Tristan Platt, Rosaleen Howard); the “Oxford” Archeoastronomy group (Tony Aveni, William Breen Murray, Anna Sofia); several symposia on Latin American culture organized by William Rowe in London; and Johanna Broda’s informed and delightful seminar at the Escuela Nacional de Arqueología in Mexico City. Other events that have left a mark include the International Congresses of Americanists at Manchester (1982) and Amsterdam (1988), the highly memorable World Archaeological Congress at Southampton (1986), and the II Colloquio Mauricio Swadesh in Mexico City (1990), as well as smaller occasions like “The Mexican Cultural Renaissance” (Warwick; Alistair Hennessey), “Amerindian Cosmology” (Edinburgh; Emily Lyle), and “Textual Authenticity” (Berlin; Peter Masson).

In general, I owe much advice, encouragement, and correction to friends and colleagues too many to name, among them Miguel León-Portilla, Raymond DeMallie, Munro Edmonson, John Bierhorst, Norman Hammond, David Kelley, David Piper, Linda Newson, Antonio Olinto, Warwick Bray,
Acknowledgments

Robert Pring-Mill, Stanley Diamond, Gayatri Spivak, Felicity Nock, Sister Mary Meneses, Denis Williams, Eduardo Merlo, Ramón Arzápalo, Constanza Vega, Ed Dorn, Alice Notley, Jean Franco, Frank Lipp, Peter Gerhard, Ann Fink, Christopher Peebles, Anabel Torres, Ruth Moya, Juan de los Santos, Michael Dürr, Günter Vollmer, Thomas Barthel, Hanns Prem, Gesa Mackentun, Jacqueline Durand-Forest, Peter Worsley, Tony Shelton, Elizabeth Baquedano, Francisco Rivas, Roberto Ventura; and others now deceased: Gerdt Kutscher, Günter Zimmermann, Sir Eric Thompson, William Fellowes, Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, Peter Bennett, and Jesús Lara. Above all, at the University of Essex I have gained more than I can easily express from friendship and a long-standing readiness to listen and share on the part of Peter Hulme, Francis Barker, Dawn Ades, Val Fraser, Philip Stokes, Tim Laughton, and Colin Taylor.

For practical help and copies of unpublished documents, I am indebted to the staff of the British Museum and the Museum of Mankind (London), the Iberoamericanaes Institut and the Dahlem Museum (Berlin), the Bibliothèque National (Paris), the Bodleian Library (Oxford), the Ulster Museum (Belfast, in particular Winifred Glover), Glasgow University Library, and the Archivo General de la Nación (México), Jorge Eduardo Navarrete, Ignacio Durán, Margo Glantz, Daniel Dultzin, Raúl Ortiz y Ortiz, Elena Uribe, and other former and present colleagues attached to the Mexican Embassy in London have been persistently generous, as were Richard Watkins, Jonathan Greenwood, and the staff at the British Council in Mexico City.

For research and travel throughout the Americas, financial help has come and been gratefully received from several sources: Essex University Research Endowment Fund, British Academy, Nuffield Foundation, Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, American Philosophical Society Penrose Fund, British Council. The inclusion of color plates was made possible by a grant from Indiana University; certain of the black-and-white drawings were done by Tony Young, and some of the photographs were taken by Barry Woodcock. Jaime and Alfonso gave support of all kinds.

The expert and patient advice offered by Michael Gnat has been invaluable, and I thank him warmly, as I do Jane Van Tassel for going through the typescript so carefully.

Finally I thank my wife Ana for participating, so that in part the book is really hers.
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